



MUTATION

# CLOSE WATCH ON NEW COVID-19 STRAIN IN UK

Experts say  
SOP and 10-day  
quarantine will  
suffice for now

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**T**HE Health Ministry is monitoring the discovery of a new Covid-19 strain that is said to be responsible for the faster spread of the coronavirus in London and southeast of the United Kingdom.

Unconfirmed reports and early analysis suggest that the mutation in the coronavirus, known as

N501Y, enables it to spread 70 per cent faster than earlier strains of the virus.

Commenting on the new variant of Covid-19, Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said: "I am not sure what the mutation in the UK is, but I think it is the spike protein mutation."

"We are (monitoring the development in relation) to the new strain of the virus," he told the *New Straits Times*.

British scientists had on Dec 19 come to an early conclusion that the coronavirus had mutated to change the structure of the so-called "spike protein" on its surface, thus increasing the protein's affinity to bind to human cells and making the virus more infectious.

Epidemiologist Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud

concurred with Dr Noor Hisham that the new strain could have risen from mutation in the virus' spike protein.

He said the new mutation was not the same as the potent D614G strain that was first detected in the Sivagangga cluster in August.

"This variant has been named the VUI-202012/01 and there are a set of 17 changes or mutations."

"One of the most significant is an N501Y mutation in the spike protein that the virus uses to bind to human cells."

Epidemiologist and biostatistician Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman stressed the importance of identifying the transmission source to understand the characteristics of the new strain.

"The strain has been reported to be highly transmissible. Therefore, we need to monitor the trend of molecular epidemi-





*Frontliners screening residents for Covid-19 at a futsal field near the Meru Community Hall in Klang yesterday. PIC BY MUHD ASYRAF SAWAL*

ology in the country.

"Current evidence shows not much information related to this new strain, except that it tends to be more infectious.

"There is no evidence showing that it causes more serious clinical presentation," Dr Malina, of Universiti Putra Malaysia, said.

Malaysian Public Health Physicians Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said: "It will depend on how the new strain behaves in term of transmissibility, response to immunity and vaccines.

"The authorities need to keep a close watch on the development related to the new strain."

Dr Awang Bulgiba said there was no scientific data to suggest that the "new variant" would lead to a worse form of the pandemic or that vaccines would no longer work.

"There is not a lot of information on this new variant.

"Because the mutation affects the spike protein used, theoretically, it may spread more easily between humans.

"But there is not enough information to suggest that it is more harmful than current variants.

"There is also not enough data to suggest that vaccines would not protect against the new variant, as antibodies produced in re-

sponse to vaccines are targeted at several parts of the virus."

If those parts remain unchanged, he said, then the antibodies would be effective, so it might not have much impact on vaccine development.

However, he said, if the mutations caused significant changes to the virus, for example, if the antibodies were unable to recognise the virus, then there might be some impact.

"Over time, Covid-19 vaccines may need to be modified in response to mutations in the virus.

"This would be similar to what is taking place for the influenza vaccine, but there isn't enough data to suggest that this is necessary at the moment."

Asked if the discovery of the new strain would compel the government to revisit the standard operating procedures (SOP) on accepting people from abroad, including the 10-day quarantine period, the medical experts replied in the negative.

Dr Malina said: "The SOP and protocols to prevent any potential introduction of new Covid-19 infections from those who return home from abroad are sufficient."

Dr Awang Bulgiba said there was not enough data to suggest

that the new variant had an extended infectious period.

"I do not think it affects the management of returnees from abroad. Returnees should continue to be quarantined and tested to make sure they are negative before being allowed home," he said.

Dr Zainal said although the SOP sufficed, it was important for the authorities to be vigilant when dealing with people entering the country from the UK.

"The authorities should monitor people placed under the 10-day quarantine, and check on any sign of them developing symptoms related to the coronavirus.

"In addition, people returning from the UK should be advised to comply with SOP and avoid crowded places for additional days after they complete their quarantine," said Dr Zainal.

Dr Noor Hisham reminded the public not to be complacent.

"Success breeds complacency and complacency breeds failure. Our greatest fear is when we let our guard down.

"Please continue to comply with the SOP as I have reminded everyone at every opportunity. The onus is on you and the public to break the Covid-19 transmissions."